

Wild Turkey

Description:

If you have ever noticed a wild turkey running around, it could be one of three turkey subspecies that have been introduced into Idaho. These subspecies are Merriam's, the Rio Grande, and the Eastern. Of these three species, the Merriam's was the first to be introduced and is the most successful, as 90 percent of the wild turkeys in Idaho belong to this subspecies.

Nothing But A Turkey

The wild turkey is really too large to be confused with any other bird. But how would you know it's a wild turkey and not a domestic one? Wild turkeys have longer legs and necks, a more slender body, smaller heads, and darker plumage than the domestic turkey. The tips of wild turkey tail feathers are light brown, while those of the domestic turkey are white.

It isn't too hard to tell the difference between male and female turkeys. First of all, males are usually much larger than females. Males, also called gobblers or toms, have longer legs, neck, and feet than do the females, called hens. Males have a bronzy, shimmering body plumage with black-tipped breast feathers while hens have light-brown breast feather tips. A gobbler usually has a 10- inch tuft of feathers called a "beard" hanging from its chest, along with an upwardly curving spur on the lower legs. These spurs help to grip limbs and are also used as weapons in fighting other male turkeys. The head and neck of the adult gobbler are typically whiter than a hen's due to less head feathering. During the spring mating season, the head of a breeding male takes on a combination of varying degrees of red, white, and blue, in order to impress any interested females.

Turkeys can often be located by listening for the conversation of a flock as it moves about. Contact calls among birds sounds like "keouk-keouk-keouk" and help keep a flock together. Flocks also often leave behind feathers and wear down paths as they move from place to place.

Important Habitat

Large areas of mature hardwood forests mixed with open areas such as pastures and hayfields provide the variety in habitat wild turkeys need to survive. Wild turkeys are not native to Idaho but were first transplanted in 1961. Since then, more than 150 translocation efforts have been conducted statewide with some additional turkey habitat still available. The Idaho Department of Fish and Game hopes to establish turkey populations in all suitable habitats and produce hunting areas for at least 20,000 hunters.

Thanksgiving Dinner

Wild turkeys are opportunistic omnivores. What does that mean? Turkeys eat a variety of plants and animals wherever and whenever available. The young, called poults, eat large amounts of insects and other animal matter to get protein needed for rapid growth. They gain as much as two times their weight each week for the first four weeks. About 90 percent of the mature turkey's diet comes from plants, including grasses, vines, and forbs. Other sources such as acorns, buds, seeds, and fruits of various types are also included in the diet. Wild turkeys also eat a variety of cultivated crops including soybeans, corn, wheat, oats, and clovers.

Now we know what a turkey eats, but what might eat a wild turkey? Raccoons, skunks, opossums, crows, and snakes are common predators of wild turkey eggs. During the first two weeks of life when poults are unable to fly, raccoons, bobcats, foxes, and coyotes take advantage of their vulnerability. Birds, reptiles, and feral dogs will prey on wild turkey hens and/or eggs when the opportunity arises.

Vulnerable Nests

The increase of daylight hours in spring triggers hormonal changes in wild turkeys in late February to early March when tom turkeys begin gobbling to attract females for mating. The gobbler flies down from his roost and begins his courtship display by strutting and gobbling for the hen(s). He raises his body feathers, fans his tail, and drops the wings close to the ground.

Once the mating season is underway, hens seek out nesting areas to lay eggs. Turkeys usually nest in areas with a well-developed understory that provides some bushy coverage. One egg is laid daily until there are a total of nine to 11 eggs. Since wild turkeys nest on the ground and need a total of six weeks to lay and incubate eggs, hens and their nests are vulnerable to predation and human disturbance. Less than half of all nesting attempts are actually successful, but since turkeys have a high reproductive potential, one good hatch can significantly increase populations.

Distribution

The range of the wild turkey is increasing and a total population of about four million wild turkeys exists in the lower 48 states. Five races or subspecies of the wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) exist in the United States. The Merriam's wild turkey is widely distributed in the mountains of the Panhandle, Clearwater, and Southwestern regions of Idaho. The Rio Grande wild turkey was first introduced to Idaho in 1982 and is present in small numbers in riparian areas adjacent to Idaho's Snake, Boise, Payette, and Weiser Rivers. The eastern wild turkey has been introduced in Idaho to a few sites near Dworshak Reservoir, and some birds may still be found there.



Wild Turkey
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Distribution Map

1. **Species:** Wild Turkey
2. **Scientific Name:** *Meleagris gallopavo*
3. **Population:**
4. **Size:** Adults: Male (gobbler) - Weight: 16-21 lbs.
Length: 4 feet. Beard greater than 7 inches.
Female (hen) - Weight: 9-12 lbs.
Length: 3 feet.
Yearlings: Jake (gobbler) - 9 to 13 lbs.
Beard less than 5 inches. Jenny (hen) - 5 to 7 lbs.
5. **Diet:** Grasses, vines, and forbs; acorns, buds, seeds, and fruits; cultivated crops (soybeans, corn, wheat, oats, ryegrass).
6. **Young:** 9-11; called poults.

7. **Lifespan:** 4-10 years.

8. **Taxonomy:** Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Aves

Order: Galliformes

Family: Meleagrididae

9. **Hunted In Idaho:** Yes

10. **Hunting Link:**